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A WORD OR TWO ON SELF-ACTIVITY IN THE SCHOOLROOM.

IT is perhaps a commonplace to say that one of the essential qualities of a man of power is ability to handle himself in strange situations in which he may be placed. Put two men down before the same problem in a field with which they ought to be equally familiar so far as their opportunities are concerned; let two statesmen attack the question of imperialism, for instance; or two physicians combat a new and desperate disease; or two teachers attempt to discipline a group of disorderly students; or two engineers endeavor to construct a bridge across a chasm. The man of power in any case will work his way through his problem; he will organize his experience with somewhat similar problems and use it to help himself in the present emergency; he will be dynamic, aggressive, original. But the weak man, not having dealt with exactly such situations before, is helpless now. He cannot draw upon his past for help in the present; he cannot mobilize his experiences, as it were. The complex problem before him, though it contains only factors with which he is, in their isolated form, familiar, yet it overwhelms him, and he withdraws from it, or stands before it sicklied o'er with lack of thought. The man of power always feels within him the ability to cope with new situations at all related to those with which he has dealt previously; but the weak man sees himself defeated before he begins the attack. His courage oozes out of him, and he grows flabby and inert.

The statesman of power believes that he can analyze out the various factors involved in the question of imperialism, and he can in the light of past conduct mark out a route for the present; so he girds up his loins and moves on the enemy. The physician of power can utilize his observations, gained in the treatment of all kinds of disease, to interpret the more or less strange case presented in the patient before him. The weak man, having never diagnosed just such a malady, does not now see and he

cannot determine what certain peculiar manifestations mean in reference to underlying principles. His experiences are fixed in certain forms or models or casts, and he cannot break them up to make a new model, choosing elements out of several of the old ones. His ideas adhere to one another as they were originally gained.

And then the weak man has never used his experience as a searchlight to explore dark regions; he has drawn back from unknown lands. He has either been afraid to be a pioneer or has not been willing to undergo the hardships of such an adventure. So he keeps to the beaten tracks. He does what he has previously done, and what he has been shown how to do. Therefore, when he finds himself face to face with an original problem, he is not equipped to attack it, because he has never undertaken such a task. He has none of the feelings or inclinations or confidence of the explorer; he has no sense of what it is to search out anything new, or how to go about it. So he accepts things as he has known them to be, and turns aside from everything unfamiliar, or treats it just as he does the things with which he is acquainted.

It will doubtless be granted by all that education should strive to develop in the young the aggressive attitude toward the world, for this is the essential requisite for individual and social prosperity. The individual or community that makes no improvements upon what has come down from ancestral times, in respect either of material or of social matters, must ultimately degenerate; for it seems to be a law of life that if there is not evolution there will be degeneration. In order even to preserve what is it seems necessary to be always striving to achieve something better. From those who have but who make no additions thereto even that which they have will be taken from them. Let a man of business cease striving to improve his methods, and he soon begins to lose even what he has achieved. Let the teacher stop growing, and it is not long before retrogression will set in. Nature seems to have planned profoundly for the continual evolution of mankind, and she visits a severe penalty upon those who refuse to co-operate with her in her efforts. Happily, though, she

has endowed most individuals with the disposition to be continually improving their lot, to be achieving a more perfect mastery of the world in which they live, so that they may thus obtain a happier and more effective life.

And what education must seek to do is to perfect this instinct and so make it effective in all the complex situations in which people are likely to be placed. Unfortunately it appears not to be so deep-rooted but that educational methods may stupefy it. We have all seen persons, and many of them, who have lost the power to deal with new situations, if they ever possessed it. They sweep and bake and knit and whip their children as their mothers and grandmothers before them did. So there are farmers who sacrifice a good deal in order that they may kill their hogs when the moon is waxing; they sow and reap according to the phases of the moon, because they learned the lesson from their fathers, and they have no disposition to question the wisdom of the past.

Now, it must be apparent that the way in which a child attacks and masters the situations presented in his spelling and reading and arithmetic and geometry and history and science will tend to establish in him a habit or method of attack which he will in later life employ in business situations, and in engineering, legal, teaching, social, and other situations. Observe a pupil in the very beginning when he is learning to read. Every day he must learn new words. When he encounters a word he has never seen before, the teacher may tell him what it is, and she may have him say it over until he fixes it so that when he sees it again he will be able to pronounce it. Whenever he encounters anything new in his reading the teacher tells him outright, and then he repeats what she tells him until he makes it his own. He never takes the initiative in dealing with new words. He does not use what he knows to help him in a new situation that is somewhat strange. When he runs against the new thing, though in its several elements it may be known to him if he would only try to use what he has already mastered in analyzing it, yet he is helpless, and he trots off to the teacher, who does not help him to use his experience, but makes it unnecessary for him to do so. Why should he be original, aggressive, when he can solve his problems more easily, as he thinks?

So he works along year after year, learning what the teacher or book tells him; these agencies relieve him from the necessity of finding his own way through new regions. Suppose this goes on, as it does in the majority of schools perhaps, during the whole period of the child's school training; how much power in reading has he acquired by the time he leaves school? He has mastered a few things, and these he can use well enough in exactly the way he has learned them, but he cannot employ them to assist himself in new situations. When he separates himself from some telling instrument—the text-book or the teacher—his growth ceases, because he has gained no sense of originality or independence in reacting upon this phase of his environment. He has no interest in pushing into new fields of literature where he will encounter new terms, because he cannot use what he knows to interpret them.

There is a quite different method which some teachers employ, but which leaves the pupil about as feeble and dependent as the first. They have heard it said that the child must be made self-active, that he must never receive any help, that he must dig out everything for himself. And so when he comes to a strange word he is refused aid, whether or not he has a sufficient body of experiences by means of which he should be able to handle the new thing. The teacher urges that, even if the child fails in his efforts, the struggle will be good for him. One sees this theory put into effect every day in the school. Children are trying and failing, and their guardians hope that in some mysterious manner strength will be developed out of weakness. So the child works on, struggling with new situations, and being conquered by them because he does not receive at the critical moment just the aid which will help him to master them. Such a teacher is a prodder; she is not a true assistant or guide. She does not know how to make a pupil self-helpful; when he fails she scolds him and tells him, and he learns by rote. He has not felt the power and gained the skill which come from mastering a new situation largely by his own effort. And after one has had a few years of experience with trying to make out new words in his reading, and much of his effort has proved of no avail,

and he gets scolded as the reward for his efforts, there is not likely to be developed in him a disposition to move vigorously on to new situations. Nature has not constructed the human mind so that it will keep straining itself to accomplish something when after repeated trials no valuable ends are achieved. She is not so wasteful of energy as this.

But there is a third way in which one may deal with a child when he is learning to read, regarded as a typical sort of school activity. When he is confronted by a new situation, the wise teacher knows whether he has already mastered anything which will help him in the present emergency. If he has, she throws him upon his own resources, reassuring him that by diligent application he can achieve success. But she follows him closely in his efforts, and does not let him struggle too long without success. Before discouragement overtakes him she gives him just the suggestion which calls into the foreground of his consciousness precisely the experiences which are related to the situations he is trying to master, and then he can see his course with reference to it. The new situation may contain no elements with which the child is not familiar, but when they are placed together he is confused by their association. His attention is distracted from a consideration of the several elements, and is dissipated in the attempt to comprehend the whole thing at once; and, the thing as a unit being unfamiliar, there does not arise to hand what he has already mastered. What the wise teacher does then is simply to direct the attention of the learner upon the familiar elements in a new word or a new problem or a new sentence, or any new thing. As she works day after day according to this method she develops in the pupil a tendency to analyze things for himself. He comes gradually to take the initiative in withdrawing his attention from the new whole which confuses him, and in noting the various factors thereof; and he acquires the power also of synthesis, or organizing parts into new wholes. And this develops efficiency, for it gives the ability to deal with new situations without being dependent upon someone else.

We have here glanced at one of the simplest situations in teaching; but if we look at more complex things we shall find

that the same principle holds there too, and in a more important measure. Take the teaching of geometry, for instance. In some of our schools one can hear pupils reciting off demonstrations as they would pieces from the rostrum. The proofs of propositions have been given in detail in their text-books, and they have learned them by heart. Anyone who chooses may hear pupils in our high schools who set out to show that a given theorem must be true, and before they reach the conclusion they get mired. Then they go back and start again in the hope that the vocal series which they tried to make automatic in the learning of the demonstration may become re-established by another effort; possibly they can catch up the dropped link by starting at the beginning of the chain. Such pupils never look at their constructions in the attempt to see for themselves what the relationships must be in the light of what they have already proved to be true in the past. But, to be more precise, they really have not proved anything in the past; they have memorized proofs that someone else has made.

And even if there is occasionally a student who memorizes a demonstration and then traces it out in the concrete problem before him, still he is not developing habits which will give him much power in the real situations of life. His mode of attack is always in seeking aid from sources outside himself. He has to be told how to proceed; he is not required to make out his own course in the light of what he already knows. When he lays aside his geometry, he has not gained the power which that study ought to confer upon him, either in dealing with geometrical problems or with the more intricate affairs of daily life. Suppose that, instead of having him learn the statement that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles, for example, and then learn the argument all made out for him, we ask him to find the sum of the interior angles of a triangle, and tell him nothing. He knows enough to solve the problem if he *will only use it*. If his mind does not work aggressively on this problem, we may set it going by asking him a question which will bring into the focus of consciousness what he has discovered regarding the properties of angles: "Do the angles at

A and *B* suggest anything you have proven heretofore?" "What have you shown heretofore to be true about the sum of angles?" "In the problem before you how can you make situations like others you have already had?" A few questions like this will make experiences in even the dullest mind dynamic to some degree, and the disposition to be self-helpful will be fostered.

When we consider such studies as science and history that ought to deal with complex relations which must be met by everyone, no matter what may be his particular vocation, we can see how vital it is that a method of study should be adopted which will develop habits of independence and originality in respect of the matters of which these subjects treat. The learning of dates and names from a text-book in history and the memorizing of statements about men and events do not equip the pupil to deal in any effective way with the social problems which history ought to help him to solve. It does not make him in a true sense social-minded, which the Committee of Seven says is the supreme object in the study of history. He has not reconstructed in his own thought and feeling the social situations which ought to be described in historical study. His mind is not filled with types of social action; verbal symbols have taken the place of images and feelings. And the schools are every day turning out into the community boys and girls who are quite unready to adjust themselves to the social, and more especially political, environments in which they are placed, because they have not been got into the habit of ferreting out principles of human nature in the concrete social life about them.

The same thing is true in principle of the study of nature, when the learning of things by rote is the method employed; when one spends his time memorizing what someone else has said about the phenomena of nature, he cannot be gaining that power which will enable him to search out the causes of happenings in the world, and give him stability and sanity in this bewildering complex universe. The memorizing attitude does not give much efficiency when one is face to face with nature transforming herself every moment into something new. There does not live in his brain real situations in nature that spring forth to

welcome any new event, so that the mind feels at home with it immediately. To the book-taught individual much of that with which he comes in contact in the real world is more or less strange and always remains so. And what is more serious, such a one does not possess the power of detecting the respects in which things differ from each other, or themselves change from day to day. As I said above, the book-taught mother cares for her children just as she remembers her mother did with her, or as she sees her neighbors treat their young ones. She makes no allowance for individual peculiarities, or for the incessant fluctuations in mind and body of any one individual. When she thinks of her children she is conscious of what she has heard or has been taught regarding them, and not of the individuals before her; she thinks of her rule and not of the children. And the principle is universal.

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